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Too Much Secrecy

Oakland, California.

A POLITICAL CRISIS can rend or it can heal. Everything depends on whether meaningful reforms follow the trauma of scandal.

The Tower Commission had its chance but failed to hasten the deeper healing process. It has won accolades for its sober but damning assessment of White House policy failures. But if the public's perception of the problem stops with that

By Jonathan Marshall

report, the nation will lose a unique opportunity for institutional change.

The report ultimately boils down to a critique of President Reagan's management style — his hands-off approach to government, inattention to detail and excessive delegation of authority supposedly explain his foreign-policy disasters in Iran and Central America.

Or, as Sen. Pete Wilson, R-Calif., put it charitably, "Reagan's compassion outran his competence."

But contrary to the implication of much post-Tower commentary, the president was neither uninformed nor denied the full range of expert advice from his top officials. He knew U.S. arms were flowing to the terrorist regime in Tehran: "I agreed to sell TOWs to Iran," he jotted in his diary. He knew that underlings were violating the intent of Congress by lining up private military aid for the contras. As the National Security Council's Oliver North noted in one memo, "The president obviously knows why he has been meeting with several select people to thank them for their 'support for democracy' [in Central America]."

Finally, Mr. Reagan knew all the objections to both policies. His secretaries of state and defense had argued vociferously against selling arms to Tehran. Members of Congress had objected repeatedly after reading press accounts of Colonel North's role in the illicit private aid network for the contras.

So the problem was not that Mr. Reagan "did not ask enough questions" (Gen. Brent Scowcroft), nor that he failed to "monitor the actions" of his subordinates (Sen. John Tower). The real problem, as only Ed Muskie saw clearly, was that the "policy was a wrong policy and it was the president's policy."

Mr. Muskie, in the press conference more than in the report he helped draft, suggested the most vital lesson of the whole affair. "The single most important factor here is the over-obsession with secrecy," he maintained. " Every time that you are overconcerned about secrecy, you tend to abandon process . . . and the result is that in this case, control of the operation slipped into the hands of Lt. Col. North and the people he assembled to pursue it."

That obsession with secrecy was an inevitable byproduct of the administration's reliance on CIA-style covert action as a fundamental instrument of foreign policy. Mr. Reagan came to power with a vocal determination to abandon President Carter's timidity about intervention abroad with the CIA.

The number of covert operations nearly quintupled from 1979 to 1984. The White House turned over to the CIA the financing of wars, revolutions, elections and propaganda campaigns. Intelligence budgets and manpower grew accordingly.

Such policies most profoundly embodied the philosophy that the ends — democracy, anti-communism, counter-terrorism — justify the means — secrecy, undemocratic political manipulation, even support of death squads. The same philosophy inevitably breeds arrogance. The tiny fraternity of officials "in the know" assume that their privileged access to information makes their judgment superior to that of members of the Congress or the public.

The culture of secrecy also breeds a paranoia about leaks that demands in turn ever greater restrictions on the circle of knowing policy makers. Thus could Adm. John Poindexter and Colonel North justify their failure to inform State or Defense of their full activities.

Instead of calling attention to the fundamental contradiction between covert action and effective oversight, the Tower Commission proposed merging the House and Senate intelligence committees into one to reduce the risk of leaks and increase the likelihood that the White House would share more of its secrets with Congress.

Its faith is touching. But Congress already tried that approach in 1980 when it slashed from eight to two the number of committees authorized to oversee the CIA. Nothing improved: the CIA still withheld vital information about the mining of Nicaragua's harbors and the buying of El Salvador's presidential election.

None of the Tower Commission's recommendations would stop a future president from arming the contras covertly. None of its proposals would stop future CIA directors from deceiving Congress. None of its suggestions would stop future administrations from compartmentalizing decisions in the name of preserving secrecy of covert operations.

Its proposals are of marginal relevance because they miss the main abuse: the conduct of foreign policy through covert operations. So long as Congress gives presidents the means to escape accountability and usurp power, presidents will continue to misuse those tools.

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